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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that small children and other people view old age and the elderly very negatively. Unless parents and teachers begin to initiate changes in thinking, old age will be a tragedy for most of today's youth. In this study, 67 second graders and 59 sixth graders in Mississippi responded to a modified Children's Attitude toward the Elderly Scale. They answered questions about aging and older persons and reacted to polar adjectives used to describe the elderly. Results indicated that sixth graders were more negative in their attitudes toward the elderly than were second graders and that boys were more negative than girls. Statistically, the attitudes of white sixth-grade boys were significantly more negative than those of black sixth-grade boys. All of the children responded negatively to questions about their own aging. Children expressed more positive affective feelings toward the elderly, with most negative reactions being related to physical characteristics. White children had more contact with elderly persons outside their families, but only 2 percent of the entire sample helped the elderly or engaged in activities with them. These results imply that intervention programs should be implemented in schools to enhance children's attitudes toward the elderly. (CB)

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Sex, Age and Racial Differences in Elementary Children's Perception of Elderly Adults

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According to the United States Census Bureau Booklet (1983) experts in population trends have sharply increased their estimates of the rate at which America is graying. By 2030 there will be 64.3 million Americans over 65 years of age, comprising 21 percent of the expected national total of 304.3 million.

In America old age is not viewed as an achievement nor as a natural state of life consisting of wisdom and beauty. In our society the elderly justifiably view themselves as ignored, rejected, and isolated. The irony of this situation is that young people, rather than recognizing biased attitudes and discriminatory acts directed toward senior citizens, see themselves as the victims. According to Troll and Turner, in a paper submitted to a House Select Committee on Aging (1970), "Antagonisms and negative attitudes between age groups are evident, youth see older groups as obstacles to their own freedom and success." Dr. Robert Adrich (1977) predicted an "intergenerational conflict" around the year 2020. Chruishank (1977) states that "In a less than fully employed economy if a worker fills a slot by displacing another employable individual the younger and older generations will be pitted against one another."

What then are the chances of having a satisfying older life? Unless parents and teachers begin to initiate changes in society's thinking, old age will be a tragedy for most of today's youth.

Brenda Crowe, in her book, Marriage and Family Living, quotes Dr. Robert Butler, a noted gerontologist and psychiatrist, who stated, "The tragedy of old age is not the fact that each of us must grow old and die but that the process of doing so has been made unnecessarily and

at times excruciatingly painful, humiliating, debilitatingly, and isolating through insensitivity, ignorance, and poverty. For the most part the elderly struggle to exist in an inhospitable world."

Research substantiates Dr. Butler's statements. Numerous investigations have examined beliefs and opinions held by various groups of people toward the elderly. McTavish (1971) reviewed more than 300 research articles on perceptions of old age and concluded "Sterotyped views of elderly are prevalent...These include the views that old people are generally ill, tired, not sexually interested, mentally slower, forgetful and less able to learn new things, grouchy, withdrawn, feeling sorry for themselves, less likely to participate in activities (except religion), isolated in the least happy or fortunate time of life, unproductive and deficient in various combinations and with varying emphasis."

McTavish further stated that of the 300 studies he reviewed only one, Treybig, was concerned with children under the age of eleven, however more recent studies have shown that small children also have general negative expectations associated with age.

Richard Jantz (1978) did a survey of children's attitudes toward the elderly, and found "They were perceived to be sick and tired." He further found that children held negative attitudes toward their own aging and the aging process. When they were asked, "How will you feel when you are old?, most replies were: "sad", "depressed", "terrible", "awful", "I'll feel mad at myself", "my face will feel wrinkled, and my eyes will be blurry", or "sad, because I'll be dying soon and I won't have the fun I had when I was little." When asked, "How do you feel about getting old?", most comments were negative, such as, "I don't want to get old", "I'm going to feel funny like falling over half dead."

Downs and Walz (1981) also found that negative attributions concerning elderly persons are evident during the preschool years. Results suggested girls were more positive toward the elderly than were boys. "Boys overwhelmingly saw the young adults as good looking and older adults as ugly."

Olson (1980) interviewed 96 children ranging in age from four through eleven years and identified children's views of physical abilities of the elderly as less active, prone to more physical disabilities, frequently ill, less attractive and more likely to feel sad than young adults. While Olson and others, Marks (1980), Chappell (1977), and James (1980) found some positive attitudes expressed by children, such as: kindness less stingy, and more friendly than young adults, negative evaluations of old age appear to be pervasive.

Research indicates that children's attitudes are developed early in life and remain as stable, enduring and directing parts of child's life. Jantz (1978) states that these attitudes have consequences for both the behavior others direct toward older people and the development of one's self-concept as an older person.

If we accept the premise that attitudes toward aging and the elderly can have a great impact upon the quality of an individual's life and upon the lives of those with whom he interacts, educators should be made aware of children's attitudes toward the elderly and be encouraged to utilize this knowledge in developing curricula.

Therefore this study has reexamined the relationship of sex and age toward the elderly and in addition seeks to determine if the variable of race is related to attitudes. More specifically the following questions have been investigated:

1. Is there a difference in attitudes toward the elderly when children are identified by sex?
2. Is there a difference in attitudes toward the elderly when children are identified by age?
3. Is there a difference in attitudes toward the elderly when children are identified by race?

METHOD

One hundred twenty-six elementary students served as subjects: sixty-seven second graders (15 black boys, 19 black girls, 18 white boys, and 15 white girls); fifty-nine sixth graders (14 black boys, 14 black girls, 16 white boys, 15 white girls). All subjects attend public schools in Mississippi and are from middle income homes. While I.Q. information was not available teachers judgment and placement of children suggested all the children were of average intelligence.

Subjects individually responded to a modified Children's Attitude toward the Elderly Scale (CATE). This instrument required the children to respond to such questions as:

1. What can you tell me about old people?
2. What old people do you know?
3. Do you have another name for old people?
4. What do you do with old people?
5. How do you feel about getting old?
6. How will you feel when you get old?

In addition, children reacted to polar adjectives selected for rating concepts of young and old people i.e. good-bad, happy-sad, clean-dirty, helpful-harmful, pretty-ugly.

RESULTS

A chi square analysis of the responses from the section "what can you tell me about old people" revealed significant differences at .05 level between second grade black boys and sixth grade black boys with responses becoming more negative with age. Significant differences were also found between sixth grade white boys and sixth grade black boys with white boys being more negative. While meaningful differences did not occur in other segments of the population sex and age did have an effect on attitudes. Between white girls and black girls few differences were reflected.

Analysis of the section "What old people do you know?" revealed that all children were able to identify elderly persons within the family structure. However, race was associated with knowledge of the elderly outside the family structure. A significant number of white children, regardless of age or sex, knew more elderly people outside the family structure.

The ability to provide an alternate name for older people was associated with age. Sixth graders in all categories did provide more alternative names. Race and sex were not associated with this ability.

The responses from the question "What do you do with old persons?" were categorized as either active, passive, or helping nature. With regard to the active dimension of interaction 42 percent of the total sample did active things. Age, sex and race were not significantly associated. Of the total sample 56 percent engaged in passive activities. Age, sex, and race were not significantly associated. Of the total sample two percent engaged in helping behaviors, doing things for and with the elderly. Age, sex, and race were not significantly associated.

The responses from the question "How do you feel about getting old?" were used to determine children's attitude about their aging. Grade level (age) was associated with feelings about getting old. Sixth graders gave more negative responses with boys being more negative than girls. Race was not associated. It should be said that 99 percent of the children responded in a negative manner.

In response to the question "How will you feel when you get old?" no significance was found, however 100 percent of the children viewed this process as negative.

In regard to children's responses to polar adjectives, age, sex and race appear to be associated with the assignment of negative characteristics. White sixth grade boys assigned more negative adjectives to a greater degree than other groups. The overall percentages of positive response toward the concept of old by categories were:

6th Grade

White Boy	Black Boy	White Girl	Black Girl
43%	51%	53%	51%

2nd Grade

White Boy	Black Boy	White Girl	Black Girl
58%	57%	62%	67%

For the total sample children assigned the following negative characteristics:

6th Grade

White Boy	Black Boy	White Girl	Black Girl
sick	poor	sick	sick
poor	ugly	ugly	poor
dirty	sad	sad	ugly
ugly			dirty
sad			sad
harmful			

2nd Grade

White Boy	Black Boy	White Girl	Black Girl
sick	poor	sad	none
sad	dirty	dirty	
	ugly		

Generally, children expressed more positive affective feelings toward the elderly with most negative reactions being related to physical characteristics. All children found older adults more good than bad and more friendly than unfriendly.

IMPLICATIONS

Based upon these findings and previous research it would appear that intervention programs designed to enhance attitudes toward the elderly should be developed and implemented within the school setting. Parents and teachers should disregard their own negative views regarding aging and the elderly and assist children in the development of more positive attitudes in order to improve intergenerational relationships and reap the benefits inherent within interactions.

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